IMPROVING INSTITUTIONS FOR PRO-POOR GROWTH

Briefing Paper 03

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Lessons from Kenya's introduction of free primary education

Summary and policy-relevant findings

In 2003 Kenya abolished all fees in state primary schools to encourage poor parents to send their children to school. Research carried out in 2008 by the Centre for the Study of African Economies (CSAE) at Oxford University and the Kenyan government shows that since 2003:

- More of the poorest children in Kenya go to primary school.
- The number of children in private primary education has nearly tripled.
- School results and overall enrolment rates in some Kenyan state primary schools have fallen.

Further research in 2009/10 will test whether the main reason for these developments is the loss of local control that came with increased centralization and free schooling.

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Project findings in more detail

Kenya's Free Primary Education (FPE) policy has succeeded in opening school doors to children from poor households. Before 2003 all parents had to contribute to certain types of school costs, and this meant that many poor children could not go to school.

Household educational expenditure

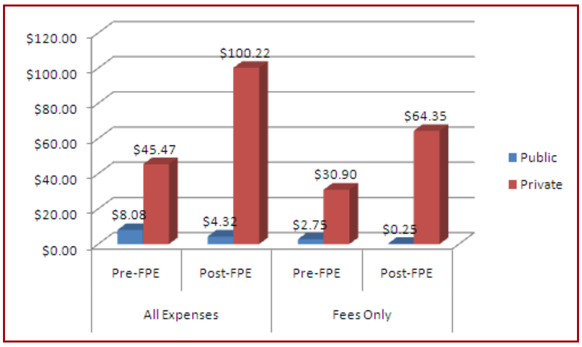

Figure 1. Following the introduction of free primary education, household educational expenditure when sending children to state schools has virtually halved. Source: Bold et al 2009 "Free primary Education in Kenya: Enrolment, Achievement and Local Accountability".

Since the introduction of FPE many more poor children go to school. At the same time, the number of children sent to private primary schools has nearly tripled and the results from some state primary schools have fallen.

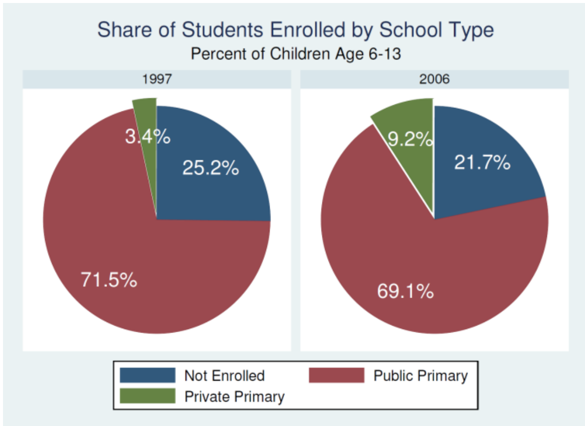

Figure 2. Comparison of school enrolment rates before and after the introduction of free primary education. Source: Bold et al 2009 "Free primary Education in Kenya: Enrolment, Achievement and Local Accountability".

How can this be explained? The statistical analysis undertaken by the Oxford University researchers is based on data from the Kenyan Ministry of Education and Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics. The data can be used to test which are the best explanations for the results. The researchers looked at private and public school enrolment rates and exam results over time. Linking the data in this way shows parallels between the fall in results in the public school system and the increase in private schooling.

The explanations for these parallels could be (i) a change in the social background of students, and (ii) a loss of local control over the school as the Ministry of Education took over school financing that was previously the responsibility of local School Management Committees and parent associations. The statistics do not suggest that the reduction in school performance is due to increased class sizes.

Ongoing and Future Research

The Ministry of Education in Kenya has been designing a community teacher programme and is currently in the process of recruiting a large number of community teachers to address some of the issues highlighted above. This initiative is designed to address multiple challenges: (i) reducing teacher shortages and unemployment among teachers, (ii) increasing the professionalization of the teaching staff, and (iii) potentially making teachers more accountable to local schools by involving School Management Committees in the recruitment and evaluation of interns. The Oxford University research team will be working closely with the Ministry of Education to pilot and evaluate this new initiative during 2009/10. More information on this work can be found in the iiG Briefing Paper 'Assessing the Impact of Community Teachers in Kenyan Schools'.

For more detailed information

- 2009: Forthcoming chapter on "Primary School Enrolment and Achievement under FPE" for the 2003-2007 EMIS Booklet.
- 2009: Forthcoming book chapter on "Public Service Delivery: Education", in Adam, Collier and Ndung'u, Kenya: Policies for Prosperity.
- 2009: "Free Primary Education in Kenya: Enrolment, Achievement and Local Accountability" presented at the CSAE annual conference. Available at http://www.iig.ox.ac.uk/output/presentations/pdfs/12a-randomized-eval-policies-kenya-presentation-01.pdf
- iiG Briefing Paper 04: "Assessing the Impact of Community Teachers in Kenyan Schools". Available at: http://www.iig.ox.ac.uk/output/briefingpapers/pdfs/iiG-briefingpaper-04-kenya-teacher-interns.pdf

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